First Generation Students Attending College

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A percentage of students who enter college each year are the first generation in their family to attend. There are several reasons why first generation students choose to go to college. For some, the parental pressure is constant throughout their K-12 education and it is just assumed that college will be the next step in securing their future career. For others, college is offered as a new idea imposed by a teacher or counselor because parents have seen college as out of the realm of financial possibilities based on their current income or out of the realm of academic preparation that their child has acquired in the public schools. We are both the first generation in our families to attend college, although we came to college from different routes.

For Cathleen Love, the decision to attend college was made by parents who wished they had had the opportunity to attend themselves. Dr. Love acquired the resources to attend college through jobs and loans. Although her parents could not pay for college, they were convinced that college was where their children needed to be and confident that they could do it. As a first generation, low-income white student, there were barriers but they were not ones Cathleen’s parents feared or doubted whether they could be overcome.

Audrey Kharem began her college career as a first generation, low-income student. She is African-American and was raised in one of Philadelphia’s housing projects. Her decision to attend college was fueled by an invitation to attend a Motivational School designed to enhance her potential to attend college. Audrey’s mother, who was a single parent and unemployed at the time, called the school to scold them for putting false hopes in her daughter’s head. Dr. Kharem’s mother was fearful that the lack of family income would stop her daughter’s college aspirations. Although she wanted a secure future for all four of her children, a college education did not appear to be a viable option. Even after Dr. Kharem’s mother became a government employee as a clerk-typist, she did not make enough money to pay for a college education. She was also concerned that Audrey had not received the academic preparation from the Philadelphia city public schools to compete and succeed in college. In addition, her mother worried about her daughter’s ability to fit into a college culture that was predominantly white.
So, even though we are both first generation, low-income students, our paths to college were quite different. The difference in our paths was not income, per se, but privilege. As a white student, there were assumptions made about Cathleen’s ability to attend college. Her parents had wealth as defined by Oliver and Shapiro (1996) i.e., wealth that the Love family contained a surplus of resources that included opportunities for improving life chances, providing further opportunities, securing prestige, passing status along to one’s family, the influencing the political process. In her work on white privilege Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes the invisible package of unearned assets that Dr. Love could cash in each day in college merely because she was white.

Beside being a first generation and low-income student, Dr. Kharem had the added challenges of attending public schools that were under-financed and unable to compete with other public schools. She is also an African American who faced attending a predominantly white institution. Her attendance in college was questioned rather than assumed. Although these challenges were overcome by her courage and perseverance, 30 years later, research findings indicate that the lack of family income, academic under-preparedness, and cultural conflicts are still issues affecting the attendance and persistence of first generation college students and their families.

Nunez and Cuccaro (1998) reported in the National Center of Education Statistics that first generation students have lower family incomes than those of non-first generation students. Twenty-three percent of the first generation students had family incomes in the lowest quartile, compared with 5% of the non-first generation students. While 59% of the students whose parents pursued higher levels of education earned incomes in the highest quartile, only 18% of the first-generation family incomes were in this category. In a 1996 study of first generation college students, Terenzini and associates also found that being low-income is a barrier to retention and graduation of some first generation undergraduates. They found that 22% of the first generation students had an average family income of $8,840, which was at the bottom of the distribution compared to 8.7% of the non-first generation students. At the top of the distribution of family incomes of $40,000 and greater, only 15.6% of the first generation students were represented compared to 39.7% students who were not first generation.

Like the difference between Cathleen and Audrey, the literature reports a difference in persistence related to family income and ethnic/racial group. St. John, Hu and Weber (2000) examined how financial aid affected the persistence of African American, Hispanic and white undergraduate
students. All students in the study were enrolled in Indiana’s public higher education system for three years, 1990-91, 1993-94 and 1996-97. The trends for each ethnic/racial group were examined. Persistence rates for African American and Hispanics students were highly related to their financial aid package compared to white student persistence which showed only a slight association. With the availability of financial aid there was an increase in the enrollment of African American and Hispanic males and the proportion of White students at research universities increased over time. This study also found distinct differences in the family income for each group. For each year of this study more African American students were from poorer families, more white students were from relatively wealthy families and Hispanics were in between. Consequently, a larger percentage of African American students received some type of financial aid while a smaller percentage of whites received financial aid. Hispanics were again in between the two groups. It is important to point out that academic performance was also a variable significantly related to persistence for all three groups. However, access to financial support was equally significant for low-income students.

To further illustrate the disparity between ethnic/racial groups and their ability to pay for the cost of college attendance, Oliver and Shapiro (1996) found while some middle class African American families earn incomes equal to that of white middle class families, they are not equal to whites I accessible liquid assets. A study conducted by the United States General Accounting Office reported that scholarships for African Americans and other minorities are only 4 percent of all scholarships (Cross, 1998). In summary, the ability to pay for a college education is closely related to retention for students from poor families. College students at the lowest level of the socioeconomic ladder are most often first generation.

First generation students from poor neighborhoods who have experienced academic success in high school are usually unaware that they could be academically under-prepared for college. Most first generation students who do decide to pursue a college degree are the high achievers in their local schools. Yet, Terenzini, et al. (1996) reports that first generation students enter college with lower reading, math and critical thinking skills. Riehl (1994) found that they also have lower high school grade point averages and SAT scores than their non-first generation peers. Students who are academically under-prepared for college are not intellectually deficient. Academically under-prepared signifies a lack of intellectual stimulation, lower teacher expectations, and, usually, a lack of exposure to educational opportunities designed to prepare students for higher learning. Adelman (1999) claims that the kind of education that students get
in kindergarten through high school may be best at predicting their postsecondary choices. Adelman argues that the rigor of the high school curriculum is the single most important variable affecting students’ completion of college. Jonathan Kozol’s book (1991) *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, (1991) clearly illustrates the vast difference in the quality of education between the haves and the have-nots in the public schools, especially for children in urban areas. In many of the schools he observed buildings were dilapidated, there was a high student to teacher ratio, insufficient funds, out-dated materials, a shortage of textbooks, and other essential school supplies. Bowen and Bok’s (1998) findings also argue that prior academic preparation, as well as socioeconomic status, has a direct impact on the academic performance of college students.

Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Gresson (1996) strongly suggest that the impact of race, class, and environmental factors on academic performance cannot be underestimated. This may explain why being academically under-prepared is a common experience of urban first generation college students who are also low-income. Kozol (1991) states, “Denial of the means of competition is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities” (p. 83). Nunez and Cuccaro (1998) report first generation students were found to be more likely to work a full-time job while enrolled in school. Undoubtedly, this too will have a direct impact on the time and energy that students have to devote to their education.

The impediments to learning and perpetuation of academic under-preparedness for low-income, first generation students often can be difficult to assess. However, in *Paving the Way to Postsecondary Education; K-12 Intervention Programs for Underrepresented Youth*, Gandara and Bial (2001) managed to identify 10 salient issues that negatively affect low-income first generation students’ opportunity to learn and prepare for college. Their results are based on a study of K-12 intervention programs nationwide designed to increase access to postsecondary education. Below is a paraphrased list of their findings.

1. *Inequalities of familial, cultural, and social capital.* Poor families and those from underrepresented groups are much less likely to have sufficient familiarity with the social and educational systems, important information, or resource networks to adequately represent their children’s interest.

2. *Inequality of resources in neighborhoods and communities.* Poor communities have fewer local resources such as libraries, parks, and museums.
3. **Lack of peer support for academic achievement.** Low income Black and Hispanic students are likely to have peers who interpret their being a good student as “acting white” and ostracize these high performers from social support.

4. **Racism.** Many in our society believe that students of color are the fault for their school problems and lack a desire to learn rather than considering the structural factors that impede their advancement. Racism also works to undermine self-confidence.

5. **Inequalities in K-12 schools, including unequal distribution of well-qualified teachers.** Schools that are highly saturated with poor children are found to have fewer resources and less qualified teachers, more discipline problems, and high turnover of both students and staff. Students who attend these schools are given less rigorous work, teachers generally have lower expectations of students, and students finish high school unprepared for postsecondary study. These problems are more likely to occur in urban centers. Students from these schools are less likely to be competitive for college than their suburban peers.

6. **Segregation of Black and Hispanic students.** Black and Hispanic students are increasingly likely to be educated in segregated schools that provide fewer opportunities for interracial contact and the development of personal and social networks that can increase cultural capital and promote social mobility.

7. **Poor high school counseling.** Under-represented students are more likely to attend crowded, inner city public schools where the quality of counseling is poor and students are not adequately informed of their postsecondary options nor helped to achieve their goals.

8. **Low expectations and aspirations.** When aspirations are defined as what a student plans to do as opposed to what he or she would like to do researchers find that underrepresented students are less likely than others to plan for higher education. This is critically important because true aspirations are powerful predictors of educational outcomes as well as opportunities made available while in secondary school.

9. **High dropout rates.** Dropping out of high school for many closes opportunities to postsecondary education and, at best, postpones the process and the benefits.

10. **Limited financial resources.** Low-income students, even with high test scores, are significantly less likely to pursue higher education than high income students with similar scores. Concerns about incurring loan debt and forgoing income that could relieve their family of financial stress
during the long years of study can convince some students to reject higher education as an option.

As researchers identify the demographics of first generation students, gender is becoming increasingly significant along with income, race and academic achievement. In general females outnumber males in college and the trend appears to be a growing. Mortenson (1991) found that by 1989 women represented 48 percent of the bachelor’s degrees earned in the United States and within a few years women became the statistical majority attending colleges and universities. At the time of Levine and Niditter’s (1996) study, women made up 56 percent of all undergraduates and earned 54 percent of the undergraduate degrees. When reviewing the statistics regarding gender differences in college enrollment and graduation rates just among African Americans, there is a definite contrast between male and female college enrollment and graduation. African American women earned 63 percent of all bachelor’s degrees awarded to African Americans in the United States (Cross, 1998).

The female to male ratio for first generation undergraduate students follows a pattern similar to their non-first generation peers. In a study conducted on the University of Kentucky Community College System by Inman and Mayes (1999) of first generation undergraduates the results show that 64.3% were women compared to 35.7% who were men. The results of a NCES 1998 report reveal similar findings, 57.3% of the nation’s first generation students are female compared to 42.7% male.

A recent study at the Pennsylvania State University summarizes the demographics commonly reported on traditional-age first generation students (Kharem, Love, & Weilacher, 2001). This research project also revealed that first generation students at four-year institutions are more likely to have a lower predicted grade point average than their peers, lower family income, be female, and a student of color. The Inman and Mayes (1999) study also indicated that first generation students at community colleges tend to be from poorer families, are older, have dependents, and are female.

For most entering freshmen, their perspective of the world has been shaped primarily by life experiences in their local neighborhoods. Prior to attending college, Dr. Kharem’s world-view was a result of growing up in the inner city of Philadelphia that provided only limited interactions with students who were from a different racial or ethnic group. While adjusting to the new environment of the university she quickly realized that most of her dorm mates who were predominantly white also had little to no experiences with diversity. Dr. Kharem’s commitment to higher education outweighed
the need to fit in or make new friends. However, this is not the case for many first generation students. A RAND corporation study (Krop et al., 1998) asked why many low income and underrepresented students eligible to attend the University of California (UC) chose a community college or state school instead. After interviewing 113 high school students, researchers found that the primary reason given for the high schooler’s decision was that UC is “not for people like me.” These low-income first generation Hispanic students expressed concern about the high cost of attendance and fear of not being prepared to meet academic and social demands.

For many first generation college students assimilating into the college culture determines if they will stay enrolled or drop out. Vincent Tinto’s (1993) attrition theory infers that if students are unsuccessful in establishing membership in a college community, they may select to depart from the institution. Tinto emphasizes that some degree of social integration must exist for students to maintain a willingness to persist in higher education. Terrenzini et al. (1994) points out that the decision to attend college for some first generation minority students was considered a break from tradition making persistence an even greater challenge for many of these students. Rendon and Hope (1996) support the work of Terenzini et al. and Tinto in her research on first generation students in community colleges. Students in her study often found that they must deal with changing identities, being perceived as different, leaving old friends behind, breaking family codes of unity and loyalty and living between two worlds. In an earlier study, Rendon (1994) described the importance of validation for first generation college students. Validation is the integration of students into the life of college through supportive, personal, human connections that sends the message you belong here. Rendon claims that a lack of validation is a major contributing factor to first generation students failure to persist.

For decades children have been told that in order to get a good job they must get a good education. Yet, when investigating the political and social barriers that many low-income, first generation students face, it appears that education alone is not the great equalizer. With that in mind, the question that arises is “besides financial aid what can be done to increase the likelihood of college success for first generation low-income students?”

Before exploring possible solutions, it is imperative to first acknowledge the benefits of diversifying colleges and universities through admitting, retaining, and graduating first generation low-income students. Research continues to document the value of diversity for our society. At the November meeting of the National Association for State Universities and
Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), Patricia Gurin (1999) reports that students who experienced the most racial and ethnic diversity in classroom settings and in informal interactions with peers showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills. Gurin reported that there is a consistent pattern of positive relationships between diversity in higher education and both learning and democracy outcomes, i.e., helping students become active citizens and participants in a pluralistic democracy. As professionals with a stake in nurturing our student’s intellectual and civic growth, we must work to increase opportunities for diversity (Kharem et al., 2001).

Undoubtedly, the educational attainment of the head of household has implications for the economic well-being of all persons living in the household. From the post World-War II years to the present the gap in incomes between individuals with and without a college education continues to grow. According to the NCES (1998), college graduates in 1975 earned 57% more than high school graduates and in 1997 they earned 77% more. Mortenson’s (1999) report indicates an even greater difference in the earnings of families headed by a person with a bachelor’s degree compared to those that are not. Families headed by a person with a bachelor’s degree now average nearly $1,400,000 more income over 40 years than do families headed by a high school graduate. He also states in that same report that metropolitan areas with a larger share of college educated adults have higher per capita personal income than do cities with a smaller share of college educated adults. As more citizens gain access to a college education the economic well being of the country will also be affected. Karoly et al. (1998) found that persons with higher levels of education are less likely to burden the social services and criminal justice systems, they also enjoy better health, live longer, and contribute substantially more to the public coffers through their taxes (Perna & Swail, 1998). Sorensen, Brewer, and Brighton (1995) concluded that Hispanics with a bachelor’s degree will pay more than twice as much in taxes as those who only completed high school. They also note that Hispanics with a professional degree will pay an estimated three times as much as those with a bachelor’s degree. Bowen and Bok (1998) argue that the opportunity to gain prestigious college degrees for underrepresented groups serves a much higher purpose than simply providing students with economic advantages. The whole society benefits when underrepresented groups gain access to higher education.

As previously stated, there are personal and societal benefits that are a direct result of access to higher education for underrepresented groups.
What can be done to increase the likelihood that these students will enroll in college, be retained, and graduate? The availability of financial aid is of vital importance for low-income first generation students to even consider pursuing a college degree. The lion’s share of what students need to prepare for college appears to occur well before they arrive on a college campus. Therefore, the challenge to meet the needs of low-income first generation students becomes more of a responsibility for the K-12 education system.

Gandara and Bial (2001) evaluated pre-collegiate programs nationwide that are funded to respond to the educational needs of first generation low-income youth. This extensive study reviewed and evaluated 34 outreach programs that were divided into five different categories: private non-profit, university-based, government sponsored (state and federal), community-based, and K-12. There are six components that the most successful programs employ.

1. **Counseling.** The primary goal of a comprehensive K-12 counseling effort is to assist students with gaining access to college information.

2. **Academic Enrichment.** To strengthen students academically some programs provide tutoring or extensive supplemental courses. Some programs provide students with opportunities to get a head start on their college requirements.

3. **Parental Involvement.** Many programs provide an orientation to inform parents of the program and its benefits. In some programs parents are required to sign a contract to support their child’s participation in the program (e.g., SOAR, Upward Bound), others engage parents to volunteer as chaperones or teacher’s aides.

4. **Scholarship.** Ten of the 34 programs included some financial assistance in the form of scholarships. Some are small awards based on academic achievement for the purpose of defraying the cost of attendance; others are career specific, diversity initiatives, or merit awards.

5. **Mentoring.** Only 13 of the 34 programs indicated formal mentoring as one of their main program components. According to Grossman & Tierney (1998), mentoring programs have shown only modest increases in student grades. Other studies have shown mentoring effects on behavioral indicators such as reduction in student truancy and drug and alcohol use (Grossman & Garry, 1997; Rogers and Taylor, 1997). Most program staff viewed mentoring as a critical element in increasing the student success rate.

6. **Personal enrichment and social integration.** Over 50% of the observed pre-college programs offer some method of personal enrichment or
social integration. Some programs bring in speakers from the local community while others use activities and workshops on leadership, goal-setting, confidence building, field trips, and cross cultural communication to name a few. The primary purpose of this component is to help students build self-esteem, develop confidence, and feel like they can achieve their goals.

Kharem et al. (2001) also discuss ways of minimizing barriers to success for under-represented students while advocating for diversity in education at all levels.

1. **Build students’ confidence regarding interaction with authority figures.** Assign students to interview a professor, a police officer, lawyer, minister, or other available public figure.

2. **Teach students to review their academic goals and assess their progress regularly.** Have students establish an academic goal for a particular course. Instruct students to write down specific steps and the timeline necessary for achieving their goal. Require students to report on their progress after they have completed each step. Encourage them to also report the challenges that they face along the way as well.

3. **Allow students to practice networking with peers based on similarities that are an addition to gender and ethnicity, i.e., academic interest, hobbies, sports, music, religion, etc.** Assign students the task of finding “like kinds and like minds.” When they find other students with whom they have something in common, require them to do a poster display, a web search or even create a logo or student organization on their common trait or interest and report it to the class.

4. **Encourage students to be proactive.** Utilizing services is their right as a consumer, not a sign of weakness. Share with them how the cost of education includes the use of service centers.

5. **Reinforce student’s sense of value, culture, and self-affirmation.** Liberally give verbal praise and encouragement to all students. Publicly acknowledge student success. Provide a safe environment for students to share cultural nuances and family traditions.
Improving access and removing barriers to higher education are critical concerns for all educators in this time of changing demographics. The number of low-income first generation students is growing and will soon be a large portion of all students entering college. This chapter has highlighted what low-income, first generation students face when they attempt to obtain a college education. It is up to the colleges and universities as well as the K-12 education systems to improve their outreach to this critical population. Education administrators have to be willing to accept the findings of the various researches cited in this chapter, as well as others, and establish policies that will eliminate the barriers to higher education for all students.

When education is obtainable for low-income, first generation students, that education adds value to the student, their family, and their community. An educated population is the foundation for the success of a democracy. Low-income first generation students will play a critical role in the future of our democracy. It is imperative that the tools to participate in that democracy are available for all.
References


